BIOGRAPHIES

Countee Cullen (1903–1946)

Unlike most other poets of his time, Countee Cullen used traditional forms and methods. However, no poet expressed the general sentiments of American blacks during the early 1900's more eloquently than Cullen.

Cullen was born in New York City. He graduated from New York University and later earned a master's degree from Harvard. His first collection of poetry, *Color,* was published in 1925. This was followed by *Copper Sun* (1927), *The Ballad of the Brown Girl* (1927), and *The Black Christ* (1929). In 1932 he published *One Way to Heaven,* a satirical novel about life in Harlem. During his later years he published two children's books, *The Lost Zoo* (1940) and *My Lives and How I Lost Them* (1942).

Cullen was one of the leaders of the movement to construct an intellectual and aesthetic culture for blacks in America, especially for those who had come from the South to New York City in the early 1900's. He claimed all of American and English literature as the literary heritage of blacks.

In "Any Human to Another," one of Cullen's best-known poems, he expresses the despair of black people.

Claude McKay (1890–1948)

In much of his work, Claude McKay evokes the rich colors and the rhythms of life on his native island of Jamaica. Yet although McKay considered Jamaica to be "home," he also regarded Harlem as his spiritual and psychic home, even though he frequently lived elsewhere. Writing to fellow Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes from abroad in 1930, McKay said, "I write of America as home [although] I am really a poet without a country."

The son of poor farm workers, McKay moved to Kingston, the capital of the Caribbean island, when he was fourteen. While living in Kingston, he began writing poetry. When his collection *Songs of Jamaica* (1912) won an award from the Institute of Arts and Letters, he was able to emigrate to the United States.

McKay's poem "The Tropics in New York" is marked by a nostalgia for his homeland—a feeling echoed in the title of his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home* (1937).

GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

Any Human to Another; The Tropics in New York

Literary Movements

The Harlem Renaissance. During the late 1800's and early 1900's, many southern blacks moved north, hoping to find opportunities in the northern industrial centers. With this shift in population, the New York City community of Harlem developed into the cultural center for American blacks. There a cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance was established during the 1920's. The movement encompassed music, art, and literature, and included such writers as Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and Arna Bontemps.

Although the literary forms and techniques used by the Harlem Renaissance writers varied widely, the writers all shared a common purpose: to prove that black writers could produce literature equal in quality to that of white writers. At the same time, the Harlem Renaissance writers focused on capturing the general sentiments of the American blacks of the time. In doing so they expressed their displeasure concerning their overall condition and articulated their cultural heritage.

Focus

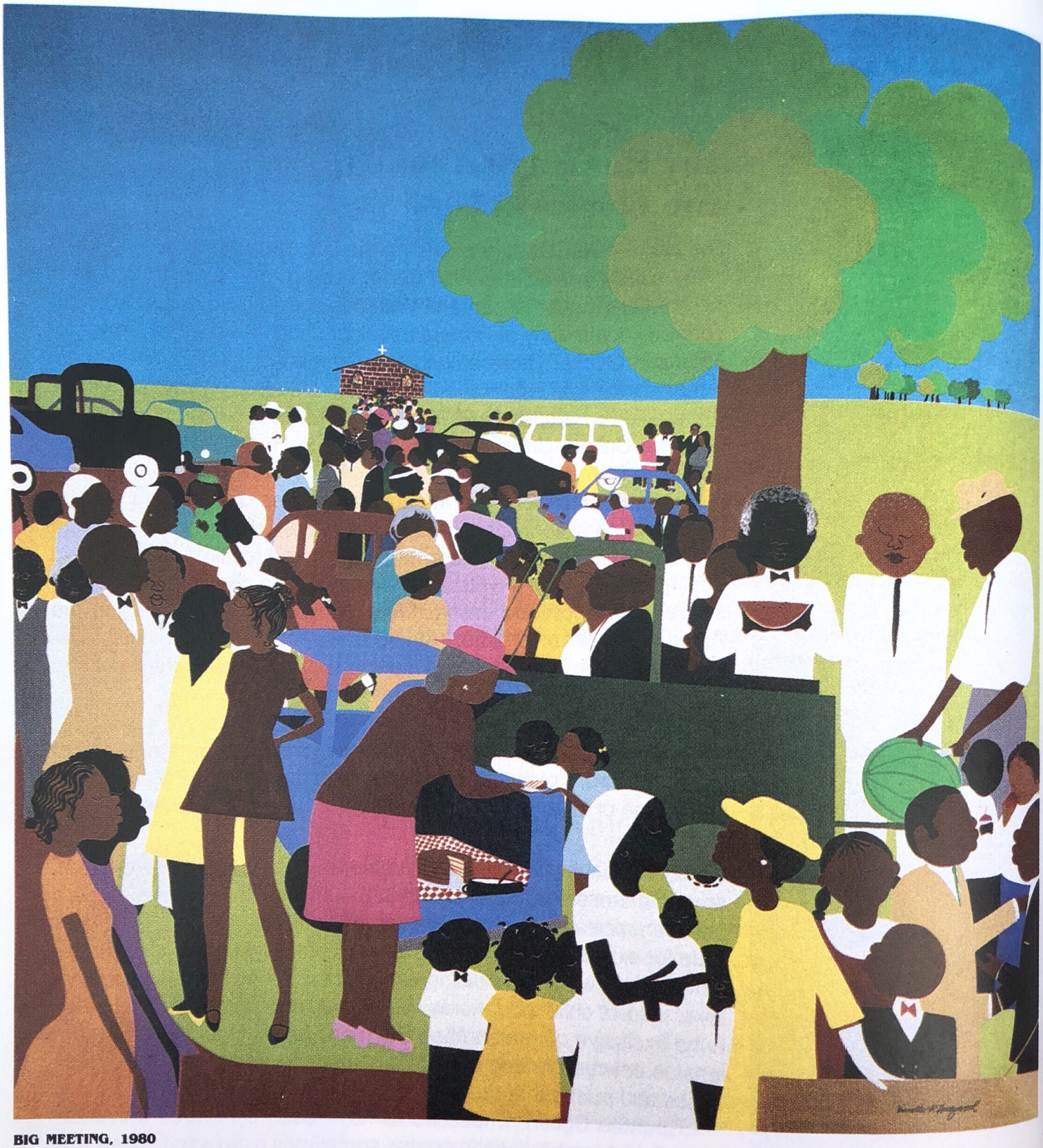
In "The Tropics in New York," Claude McKay presents a series of images, or word pictures, associated with the tropics. Prepare a list of the type of images you would expect to find in this series.

Commentary

One of the issues that the writers of the Harlem Renaissance debated among themselves and explored in their poetry was the relationship between race and poetry. Some viewed their poetry as primarily a vehicle for expressing what it means to be black in America; others regarded their works as dealing with more traditional poetic subjects: love, nature, childhood, home. These subjects were not considered to be exclusive of one another. But many black writers discovered a tension between writing poetry that dealt explicitly with black experiences and poetry that dealt more with universal experiences.

Countee Cullen, whose works have been compared with traditional British and American poetry, sometimes expressed a view that black writers should write within the broader literary tradition and transcend their own racial background. But at other times, he admitted how difficult this was to do. "Somehow or other I find my poetry of itself treating of the Negro, of his joys and his sorrows—mostly of the latter—and of the heights and depths of emotion which I feel as a Negro."

Which view do his poems express?



BIG MEETING, 1980
Varnette P. Honeywood
Black Lifestyles, Los Angeles

Any Human to Another

Countee Cullen

The ills I sorrow at
Not me alone
Like an arrow,
Pierce to the marrow,
Through the fat
And past the bone.

Your grief and mine
Must intertwine
Like sea and river,
Be fused and mingle,
Diverse yet single,
Forever and forever.

Let no man be so proud
And confident,
To think he is allowed
A little tent
Pitched in a meadow
Of sun and shadow
All his little own.

Joy may be shy, unique,
Friendly to a few,
Sorrow never scorned to speak
To any who
Were false or true.

Your every grief
Like a blade
Shining and unsheathed
Must strike me down.
Of bitter aloes wreathed,
My sorrow must be laid
On your head like a crown.

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. What emotions does this poem arouse in you?
2. Do you agree with the speaker's assertion that people must share the sorrow of others? Why or why not?

Interpreting

3. How is the image presented in the first stanza echoed in the final stanza?
4. What is the meaning of the image presented in the third stanza?
5. Why does the speaker feel that joy is more difficult to share than sorrow?

Applying

6. Why do you think sharing feelings of sorrow with others often makes a person feel better?

Analyzing Literature

Understanding the Harlem Renaissance

The **Harlem Renaissance** was a cultural movement that emerged in Harlem during the 1920's. In their work the writers of the Harlem Renaissance tried to capture the essence of black life and communicate the general sentiments of the black people.

1. What do the emotions discussed in this poem suggest about the overall sentiments of the black people at the time?
2. How does the image presented in the first stanza suggest that the suffering of the black people is deeply rooted in the past?
3. What do you think is the poem's main purpose?

Learning Option

Cross-curricular Connection. The Harlem Renaissance encompassed music and art as well as literature. Explore the accomplishments of the musicians and artists involved in the movement. Choose one who interests you, and report on his or her achievements. Enhance your report by bringing in and sharing recordings or pictures.

The Tropics in New York

Claude McKay

Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root,
Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,
And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,
Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,

Set in the window, bringing memories
Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,
And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies
In benediction over nun-like hills.

My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;
A wave of longing through my body swept,
And, hungry for the old, familiar ways
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. Have you ever longed for a place from your past? If so, which place? Why?
2. In this poem, the fruit in the window evokes memories of the poet's birthplace. What objects evoke memories of special places from your own past? Why?

Recalling

3. (a) What fruits are "set in the window"? (b) Of what do they bring memories?
4. (a) What emotion sweeps through the speaker's body in the final stanza? (b) How does he respond to this emotion?

Interpreting

5. How does the title contribute to the meaning of the poem?
6. What impression does the speaker convey of his homeland?
7. Which words create especially vivid images? Explain the reason for your choices.
8. How do the speaker's observations in the first stanza lead to the emotions he experiences in the third stanza?

Applying

9. Why do you think people often idealize and long for places from their past?

Thinking and Writing

Writing a Poem About a Special Place

Write a poem in which vivid, memorable images lead the speaker to recall a place for which he or she has very powerful feelings. Start by listing the images that lead to the speaker's re-

ollections. Then list the speaker's emotions concerning the place he or she recalls. Present the speaker's observations in the first stanza; present his or her associations in the next stanza; and describe his or her emotions in the third stanza. When you finish writing, revise your poem and share it with your classmates.

Learning Options

1. **Art.** Put yourself in the place of a travel agent booking vacations to the tropical paradise McKay describes in his poem. Create a travel poster that you can hang in your window. Find pictures or create original drawings that correspond to the vivid images McKay uses to describe his native land. When you have finished your poster, present it to your classmates.
2. **Writing.** Imagine that the poet has returned to his native land after being away for more than twenty years. Tell the story of his return visit. Describe how he might have reacted. Would his former home live up to his memories of it? How might it have changed since he left?
3. **Cross-curricular Connection.** Explore the history and culture of Jamaica or one of the other Caribbean islands. Share your discoveries with your class. To give your classmates a better sense of what life is like on the island, bring in photographs, musical recordings, or native objects, such as tropical fruits and seashells.